good men die too/oh, I'd rather be with you
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good men die too/oh, I'd rather be with you

by moonrocks

Summary

Gale first sees the bruise on Bucky's face during breakfast that morning.

Notes

This was inspired by someone who commented on one of my other fics that I should explore the scene where Curt punches Bucky. So thank you Lunar_Starline for the idea!

Title is lyrics from "Crush" by Ethel Cain.

See the end of the work for more notes

Gale first sees the bruise during breakfast that morning. Bucky is sitting across from him, the skin on his right temple purpling towards his eyebrow like a lavender stain. Gale looks down at his eggs. He pretends not to notice as Bucky recounts his demotion and Jack swears under his breath at his new appointment as air exec.

Gale holds back a sympathetic laugh as Jack gets up and leaves in a huff. Now alone, Bucky looks over at him expectantly. Gale tries not to reveal anything on his face, but Bucky quickly has him pegged.

“Oh, I can read upside down, Buck.”

Of course, Gale put in a good word for him. Everyone in the 100th knows that Major John Egan is better suited as a squadron commander than an executive officer. Some men are just leaders, not managers, and it was becoming obvious to Gale that the daily tedium of military life was a poor match for Bucky’s impetuosity. He should be up in the air with the boys, bombing supply lines and outmaneuvering German fighter planes, not planning practice missions and making sure their beds are made.

Maybe it’s also selfishness on Gale’s end, a consequence of that secret, shameful part of him that always wants Bucky by his side, even if it might mean certain death. Bucky sips at his coffee, turning his head to the side to look out the mess hall windows. Airmen pass by in their gold and chocolate uniforms, chatting away jovially. Gale glances at the bruise on Bucky’s temple again, but he doesn’t get the chance to ask him about it. Bucky starts talking about all the death notices he’ll have to write, and Gale doesn’t have it in him to interrupt.

“I’ll help you,” Gale says.

Later in the afternoon, they hole up in a spare office at HQ to write thirty letters home for the thirty boys they lost, plus Barnhill. Bucky hunches over the typewriter at a burly wooden desk while Gale sits back in the chair across from him, scribbling in a notepad. No matter how hard Gale tries, every letter comes across the same, with the same patriotic hot air. *I am greatly sorry for your loss*, Gale writes for the tenth time. *Please accept my deepest sympathies and sorrows. Your son died a hero in service of his country.*

Gale believes it — he has to — but the task is no less gutting. Thirty men, and not a single U-boat pen bombed. Gale knows not to put that in the letters.

He hands the notepad over to Bucky to transcribe. He types rather amateurishly, slow, using his two index fingers. The typewriter dings and dings again. Gale reads over each letter when Bucky is finished and realizes with warmth and a bittersweet sentimentality that Bucky has added personal details to each one. He addresses each grieving mother and father by name, going on to describe what he remembers of their fallen sons: acts of kindness they did for their brothers, humorous stories from routine training operations, the joy they brought to dances and off-base social gatherings.

“How’s my spelling?” Bucky asks after a minute.

Gale blinks, afraid that moisture is welling in his eyes. “It’s good, Bucky. It’s good.”

Gale hands back the letters for Bucky to sign, all thirty-one of them. The sun is setting by the time they finish, the sky an eerie tinge of green where the red of the sun meets the ink-blue dark. Bucky’s bruise is more pronounced by now, and Gale can’t stop himself from asking.

“Where’d you get that?”

Bucky looks up from his typewriter. “Get what?”

Gale motions to his own face, draws an imaginary circle around his temple. “This.”

“Oh.” Bucky sets the stack of letters aside for an orderly to mail. He raises his hand to his cheek, tracing the bruise with the pads of his fingers. “Me and Curt were fooling around.”

“Fooling around?” Gale asks. “Fooling around how?”

Bucky shrugs. “He walloped me.”

“Why?”

“Because I asked him to.”

Gale blinks at him. He should be surprised, but Bucky’s always had eccentric tendencies as a loyal slave to his impulses. He was probably wasted when it happened. Gale wants to pry, but his eyes drift to the stack of letters on the desk. Bucky lost thirty men too, and he was on the ground for it, helpless as to whether or not they made it back.

Gale can’t know what Bucky’s feeling, and he’s not sure he wants to

know either. Bucky deals with things on his own terms, in his own way. Gale has never understood it, not really. It's times like these when he's reminded how different they are — even though they've been inseparable since flight school — and he suddenly feels strange in his own skin.

"Well, be more careful next time," Gale says. "The men seeing you all beat up," he shakes his head, "it's not good for morale."

"Yes, Major," Bucky says and grins devilishly.

They hit up the pub later that night with Curt, Harry, and the others, even with the loss of men weighing heavy on their shoulders. Gale gets whiplash from it sometimes. The pendulum of war swings rapidly from mourning to celebration. Gale doesn't think he'll ever get used to it, while Bucky seems to take it in stride.

Gale shoves Bucky back into his seat when one of the Brits proposes a friendly boxing match between the boys. He can't have Bucky taking one to the face two nights in a row, even if he's been asking for it. Curt begs to do the honours, and Gale concedes, knowing Curt has a mean left hook. He could take any one of them despite his deceivingly short stature, and he does just that, knocking the Brit on his ass in one fell swoop.

Bucky cheers and picks Curt up in his arms, carrying him around like a trophy he's just won. On the way back to base, Gale and Curt lag behind Bucky who romps carelessly through the streets, singing show tunes out of key at the top of his lungs. Gale can't help but laugh, but there's something else on his mind.

"You've turned out to be quite the boxer, Biddick," Gale says, twisting a toothpick in his mouth. "I hear you popped Bucky pretty good the other night."

"Yeah? You gonna court-martial me, Major?" Curt smirks like a cat around the end of his cigarette. "I told Bucky I didn't want to break rank but he insisted."

"You're not in trouble. Just wondering what spurred him on."

They both glance over at Bucky near the end of the street, his tall, shadowy figure casting ink blots on the houses he strolls past.

"He's an odd duck that one," Curt says and clicks his tongue. "But you knew that, Buck. You know better than most."

“I guess so.”

“Maybe you should talk to him.”

“Talk to him?” Gale asks. “About what?”

Curt shrugs. “I don’t know. The fightin’, the drinkin’.”

Gale doesn’t understand why Curt’s coming to him with this. Bucky’s always been a bit of a wild child, Curt often eggs him on in that regard. It must be pretty bad if even he’s concerned about John.

“We all deal with things in our own way,” Gale says, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “You think he needs a babysitter? I’m not his CO.”

“Sure, sure.” Curt puts his hands up in surrender. “He just listens to you, that’s all.”

Gale laughs. “Not sure where you got that idea.”

Curt pats Gale on the back, then breaks out into a jog to catch up with Bucky. Bucky lets out a war cry and picks up Curt again, spinning him around. They both shout obnoxiously, then start to sing, an old army tune. Gale hides his face in his hands and follows them home.

Besides Curt’s little Scottish detour, the mission is a renowned success. They’re not so lucky in Regensburg. By some miracle, they make it to Algeria, but Gale misses the runway. Bucky makes sure to remind him of that as soon as he exits his plane, boots crunching in the sandy camel-coloured dirt and the sun setting behind them.

Curt is gone, either captured or burnt up in the air or meat paste in some German farmer’s field. All they know is he didn’t come back, and when people don’t come back there’s a good chance they’re dead. Nobody saw any chutes. No one recorded the plane going down. Bucky sounds optimistic about it, but Gale can see the cracks in his facade.

They sleep beneath the wings of their forts, rucksacks under their heads and eyes aimed at the stars. The moon is bright and the sky looks so huge from where they are, flat and blue and endless like an upside-down sea. Gale barely sleeps. The ground is hard and unforgiving, but it’s the adrenaline leftover from their mission that keeps him awake. His body seems to believe he’s still in the sky, dodging flak and trying to keep his men alive.

He rolls over and sees that Bucky is still awake. He's sitting up, holding his portable shaving mirror up to his face and examining the cuts he got from bits of flak that pierced his cockpit. They blemish his nose and cheeks like red dashes. He wets a spare rag with water from his canteen and wipes away the dried blood.

"Hey," Gale says after a moment.

Bucky glances over. "Oh, hey, Buck."

He keeps dabbing at his face with the rag.

"You should get somebody to look at that," Gale says.

Bucky snickers. "Well if you see any pretty blonde nurses done up in white around here you let me know."

Gale rolls his eyes. Bucky blots at the cut on the bridge of his nose and winces. It must be especially deep.

"Fuckin' Krauts ruined my perfectly good face," he says. "Do you think I'll need stitches?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

"Can you take a look?"

Gale sits up and shimmies closer to Bucky. "Got a lighter?" he asks.

Bucky rummages around in his rucksack for one, pulls it out and sets it in the palm of Gale's hand. Gale flicks the spark wheel and it comes to light. He brings the flame towards Bucky's face but not too close. The bruise on his temple has long faded into flesh tones, replaced by new scars. Still, Gale thinks of it in this moment.

This close, he can smell the alcohol on Bucky's breath. He knows he's been pulling from his flask since they landed. Gale doesn't know what alcohol means to Bucky, but to Gale, it's impulse, a lack of control. Gale learned from his father that you can't push your feelings down with drink. Quite the opposite really. It may be a temporary salve, but the wound always bubbles to the surface.

"Doesn't look too bad," Gale says. "You'll heal up." He motions to the rag in Bucky's hand. "Let me see that."

Bucky hands it to him and Gale gently wipes away some of the dried blood on Bucky's left cheek. The proximity is intimate. It might be

uncomfortable if Bucky wasn't Bucky, and Gale wasn't Gale. Bucky looks at him with soft earnestness, never afraid to meet his eyes. Twin flames dance in the centers of his pupils. Gale wants to dart away from his gaze, but he stays in place, wets the rag again and brings it back to Bucky's face. He wipes the dirt and sweat from his brow like he wants to wash the war from his skin. He'd never say it out loud, but he doesn't like seeing Bucky like this, so worn down that the cracks are finally showing.

"You make a pretty good nurse," Bucky says with a smirk, his voice honeyed.

Gale's ears warm. He lowers the rag. "Do you want some iodine? I might have some in my aid kit."

"I think I'll live," Bucky says. "For now, at least."

At that, the mood sobers, and Bucky's smile fades.

"He's dead, isn't he?" Bucky says. "Curt?"

Gale doesn't say anything, just looks down and wrings the water out of the rag.

"I thought I'd still be able to feel him, y'know? But I don't. He's gone. Either that or he's fucking rotting away in some Kraut camp."

"I don't know, Bucky," Gale says, shaking his head. "You should try and get some sleep. You're exhausted."

Sleep off the booze, he wants to say but doesn't.

They've had losses before, God knows they have, but no one as close to them as Curt. Gale thinks again of Bucky's faded bruise: another reminder of Curt, gone into the ether.

Eventually, Bucky curls up beside Gale like a cat, and they sleep.

It's sombre when they return to base a couple of days later and find themselves back at the barracks, staring at Curt's empty rack, his bed made before he left. While the other boys go and get some chow, Bucky and Gale pack up Curt's foot locker to send home to his folks. They go through his nightstand, gathering some comic books and unsent letters, half-written and never to be finished.

Gale wonders who'll write the death notice home. Bucky might

volunteer, but Gale secretly hopes he doesn't. He can imagine Bucky holed up in an office at HQ, hammering away on a typewriter and taking a swig of his flask after every word.

That night, Gale wakes up to find Bucky missing from his rack, his sheets rumpled at the bottom of the bed as if he left in a huff. Gale glances at his watch on the nightstand: 0430 hours. He dresses and laces up his boots, then goes out to find him. The officers' club is closed, and the mess hall won't be open for another hour or so. There are only a few places Bucky might've wandered off to.

Gale finds him in the first place he looks. He's out on the runway, sitting in one of the newly repaired forts. Gale can see his silhouette through the cockpit windows. He ducks underneath the wing, then bangs his fist on the bottom hatch.

"Bucky, it's me," he says.

A beat passes, then it opens. Gale hoists himself inside the hull of the plane, then walks into the cockpit, sitting down in the co-pilot's chair. Bucky's flask rests on the dashboard, and Gale can smell the alcohol on him as he leans back leisurely in his seat.

"What are you doing out here?" Gale asks.

Bucky just shrugs. He doesn't make eye contact, instead peering out the front windows at the darkened sky. The sun won't be rising for another thirty minutes or so. Gale rests his elbows on his knees and leans forward, trying to chase Bucky's gaze. Bucky doesn't relent, still looking away. There are streaks on his cheeks, the whites of his eyes slightly red, and Gale realizes he's been crying. He's never seen Bucky so affected before; the liquor can't be helping.

Gale doesn't know what to say. He just watches as Bucky reaches for his flask then takes another pull.

"Is this about Curt?" Gale asks eventually.

Bucky purses his lips. "I don't know," he says. "It's about all of 'em I guess. Curt and his crew, and Barnhill and the thirty guys we lost over Bremen. Adams, Petrich—" Bucky pauses, looking pained. "God, I can't even remember all their names."

He takes another swig of his flask, tipping it back far enough that Gale can tell it's nearly empty.

“Come on, John,” Gale says. “That’s not gonna make it go away.”

Bucky laughs. “You’re so fucking sanctimonious.”

The comment stings, but Gale tries not to take it to heart. It’s obvious that Bucky’s hurting, and drunker than he has any right to be. He doesn’t mean it.

“Come on, let’s go,” Gale says, motioning towards the hatch with the tip of his head. “You should sleep it off before our orders this morning.”

“Fuck our orders,” Bucky spits.

He tries to take another sip of his flask, but finding it empty, he throws it aside. It clatters in the hull of the plane. Bucky runs a hand through his hair and doesn’t meet Gale’s eyes. Gale should just leave — let Bucky wallow and drink himself half to death like Gale’s father did — but something makes him stay by his side. Maybe Bucky’s more sympathetic, his cause more just than his father betting away their livelihood at the horse track. There’s a war on, and right now, they’re both acutely aware of it. They’ve won some and lost most; Gale doesn’t like those odds. He couldn’t forgive himself if he left Bucky here, hurting, and in a few weeks’ time, his plane was shot down or worse.

Gale just sits with him in silence, hoping that Bucky will put his head back on straight, or at least sober up a bit.

The sky is beginning to lighten when Bucky finally says, “Buck.”

“Yeah?”

“Can you do something for me?”

Gale sighs. “Like what, Bucky?”

“I want you to hit me.”

Gale blinks at him, searching Bucky’s face for some indication that he’s joking, but he looks dead serious. Gale remembers what Curt said, his insistence that he talk to Bucky about it. He hadn’t, but maybe Curt had been right; it was worth a conversation.

“I’m not going to hit you,” Gale says simply.

“Come on.” Bucky’s smirking now. “It’ll wake me up. Plus, it’s the

only sport you like. Man-to-man, just like you said."

"You're drunk, Bucky," Gale says. *And you're hurting enough as it is*, he thinks but doesn't voice. "It's not a fair fight."

"Jesus Christ, who cares about fair? This whole fucking war isn't fucking fair," Bucky says. "Just hit me."

Gale clenches his jaw. "I don't want to."

"Sure you do."

"I don't, John."

This isn't sport that Bucky wants, it's punishment. Punishment for what Gale doesn't exactly know. Maybe he blames himself for Curt, or any of their guys going down for that matter. Either way, Bucky isn't being fair to himself. None of this is his fault. He didn't start the war. They can thank the Krauts and the Japs for that.

Gale wants to say all this and more, but he doesn't get the chance before Bucky is leaning across the narrow aisle between their seats and grabbing the front of Gale's jacket in his fists.

Gale swallows. "Come on, what are you—"

Bucky jostles him slightly. Gale tries to push him away, but Bucky doesn't loosen his grip.

"Gale, please," Bucky says, strained, and Gale can really smell the alcohol on his breath now. "I just want to feel something. Just not this. Something else."

"I'm not going to hurt you," Gale insists. He grips Bucky's wrists in his hands, gently holds them against his chest. "I don't care how bad you're feeling. I'm not gonna be the one who makes it worse."

Gale's father was the type to lay his hands on people. All it ever did was make Gale resent him.

Bucky's grip loosens, but he doesn't pull away. They look at each other for a moment, Gale's eyes gliding over the cuts on Bucky's face. His expression is similarly wounded, like Gale refusing to hit him is some sort of rejection, not an affirmation that Gale cares about him enough not to do it.

Gale doesn't know how to make Bucky understand, so he leans

forward and lets their foreheads fall together. He feels Bucky's breath, shaky against his face, and lets his eyes close. He's tired, tired of losing people, tired of Bucky's resistance to anything that doesn't leave him drunk as a skunk and flat on his ass. Gale lost Curt too. They all did, but Bucky's pain tends to swallow up the whole room.

Gale is swimming in it when Bucky closes the remaining space between them. Their lips brush, and at first, Gale thinks it must be accidental. Then, Bucky is leaning into it, taking Gale's mouth in his own. He tastes rich and oaky, like the whiskey he's been drinking, and the bristles of his mustache tickle Gale's upper lip. Initially, Gale doesn't dare move, just sits there as still as water while Bucky kisses him.

When Bucky pulls away, he looks embarrassed, ashamed, and the apples of his cheeks are as red as they are when he takes his air mask off after a long mission. Gale would do anything to wipe that despondent look off his face, so before Bucky can say anything, or even whisper a word of an apology, Gale reaches out. He gently grasps the back of Bucky's neck and pulls him forward again.

Their lips slot together so easily this time. Bucky hums in surprise, but he's soon kissing Gale back without hesitation. His hands finally abandon the front of Gale's jacket to cup his face. Their noses bump with the desperation of it, and Gale wants to get closer somehow. The soft slip of their lips is intoxicating, stirring something deep in Gale's stomach. He opens his mouth, beckoning Bucky to come in, and Bucky presses his tongue against Gale's front teeth, kissing him so hard Gale forgets to breathe.

Just when Gale is aching for air, Bucky's lips leave his mouth, painting a line across Gale's jaw to his ear.

"I've wanted this for so fucking long," Bucky breathes. "You don't know how long I've wanted this."

Gale doesn't know what to say to that, just finds Bucky's mouth and kisses him again. Against his better judgement, Gale feels himself hardening in his slacks. Bucky must notice because he reaches between them and palms at Gale's cock through the fabric. Gale freezes and grabs Bucky's hand.

"We can't," Gale says.

Bucky frowns, and it pains Gale to deny him like this. "Why not? No one's gonna know."

“It’s not that.” Gale curls his hand around Bucky’s wrist. He brings his palm up to his face and presses his cheek there. “I want you, just not like this.”

“Like what?”

“John, you’re drunk,” Gale says, “and you’re mourning.”

Hurt dashes across Bucky’s face. He pulls his hand away from Gale’s cheek and his gaze falls to the floor. For a moment, he worries his bottom lip between his teeth, then takes a breath.

“Not sure if you’ve noticed this, Buck,” he says bitterly, looking at him with indignant eyes, “but we’re always fucking mourning.”

Gale watches as John rises from his seat and leaves the plane out of the bottom hatch. He lets him go, sitting in silence for a few minutes in the cockpit by himself. Eventually, he gets up and finds Bucky’s discarded flask in the hull; he’ll be wanting it later. Gale screws the cap back on and puts it in his pocket.

Gale finds Bucky near the barracks, sitting in the grass as the sun rises behind his shoulders. The sky is a mishmash of colours, quilted with blues and reds and yellows like a hand-me-down coat that’s been patched one too many times.

Gale wordlessly approaches Bucky and hands him back the flask. Bucky takes it, and Gale notices the ire is gone from his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky says after a while.

It’s not like them to fight, but this war must be getting to them both, these so-called suicide missions. Gale looks down at the top of Bucky’s head, noting the slight wave to his hair that only gets curlier the more he sweats in his aviator helmet. He drops a hand to Bucky’s shoulder and squeezes it. It’s all he can do now that base is beginning to wake up.

“I’m sorry too,” he says.

Bucky just nods, refusing to meet Gale’s eyes.

A group of airmen pass them on their way to the mess hall. Gale sits beside Bucky in the grass, and they don’t say anything for a long while. Maybe they’re waiting for the world and the war to move on without them. It never does.

End Notes

Thank you for reading! Let me know what you thought.

I'm on tumblr at my MotA sideblog if you want to chat about these two: ww2yaoi.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!